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# The secret warrior at the CIA

AS YOGI WOULD SAY, it's *deja vu* all over again.

Fifteen years ago, the White House was issuing angry denials in response to revelations from a *Washington Post* reporter named Bob Woodward, revelations that turned out to be true. Woodward, now an editor at *The Post*, is prompting the same sort of denials today with his new book about the late William Casey, the director of Central Intelligence until his death earlier this year. The book is called *Veil: The Secret Wars of the CIA, 1981-1987*.

Whether Woodward's latest revelations stand the test of truth will take time to know. Meanwhile, the provocative questions they raise are important. Just as the Bork hearings have prompted Americans to think seriously about profound constitutional questions, the Woodward revelations and related questions offer an opportunity to focus on basic issues of journalistic ethics and the role of the media. The revelations themselves, growing out of some four dozen interviews with Casey over a period of four years, should prompt us to think, yet again, about the role of an intelligence agency in a free society — and about ambitious men.

It's not surprising that persons close to Bill Casey are challenging Woodward's integrity. President Reagan told reporters the book contained "a whole lot of fiction." Casey's widow, Sophia, has accused Woodward of fabricating a deathbed interview with the spy chief. The archconservative *Washington Times*, *The Post's* rival, quoted an anonymous physician "familiar with the facts of the CIA director's condition" as saying that Casey was unable to hear or speak when the interview was reported to have taken place early this year. (Other sources have told reporters that Casey could, in fact, say a few words.)

We have no idea how Woodward got into Casey's hospital room, though we have no reason to doubt that he did. As Robert Kaiser, *The Post's* national affairs editor, told *Reuters News Service*, "If you're the most famous journalist of your generation, whose reputation is built on ferreting out facts that no one else can get, why on earth would you make something up? You'd have to be sick to do that."

Not only is Woodward's veracity as a reporter at stake, another issue is how he and *The Post* used the information Casey gave him.

Should *The Post*, for example, have published details of the hospital interview when it occurred? Woodward and his editors defend their decision not to publish anything at the time of the interview. Woodward has said he could not be sure Casey was "lucid" when he nodded yes in answer to a question about whether he knew money had been diverted to the Contras from arms sales to Iran. *Post* editor Ben Bradlee said that in a book the incident could be put into a "larger context."

That is a distinction that leaves us troubled. It also leaves Woodward open to the charge that he was withholding, in the words of *New York Times* columnist Flora Lewis, "information of clear and urgent import for later inclusion in a megabucks book."

We would argue that, in principle, the reporter's obligation is to his newspaper readers, though there are no hard and fast rules about when a breaking story is ready to be told. It's at least debatable whether Casey's "deathbed confession" was newsworthy at all.

Related questions come to mind: Are there different standards of accuracy and veracity for newspaper articles and for books? Does a reporter who also writes books face a confusion of roles? How does a reporter balance the relationship with a source with his obligation to readers? More specifically, did Woodward agree to certain ground rules for his discussions with Casey?

Beyond the ethical issues are the revelations about Bill Casey and his tenure at the CIA. They are disturbing.

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In an excerpt published Sunday, for example, Woodward writes that President Reagan signed a secret intelligence finding that directed the CIA to train and support small foreign units in the Middle East to conduct pre-emptive strikes against alleged terrorists. The plan was said to have led to a car bombing near Beirut that killed 80 people. It left its target, the leader of the militant Hezbollah, or Party of God, unharmed. The president denies he signed such a finding.

At one point in the excerpt published Sunday, Woodward quotes from a phone conversation he had with Sophia Casey. "From the head and the heart, Bill was a born patriot," she told Woodward.

Bill Casey, no doubt, saw himself in just that light. But to read about how this "born patriot," ran what was essentially a shadow State Department, how he effectively sabotaged arms control agreements over the years, how he was ever ready to flout the law for causes he deemed worthy, is to see him in a different, more disturbing light. It is to see that in an era of uncertain leadership and national resolve, born patriots, like zealots, can run amok.